

Intra-articular Facet Blocks

An intra-articular facet block is a procedure used to treat neck and back pain in patients with irritated facet joints. These are the joints in your spine that allow you to bend and twist your back and neck. Daily wear and tear can bother the facet joints and cause you pain.

During the procedure, the area in and around the facet joint is injected with a mixture of a local anesthetic and a steroid. The local anesthetic will numb the area. The steroid may help lower the swelling, which should reduce your pain.

Preparing for the procedure

Once your procedure is scheduled, we will give you instructions on how to prepare. For your safety, please tell us if you:

- Take a blood thinner (for example, warfarin/Coumadin, Lovenox or Plavix);
- Take any medicine that contains aspirin or an anti-inflammatory drug, such as ibuprofen (for example, Advil or Motrin) or naproxen (for example, Aleve);
- Have a condition that prevents your blood from clotting normally; or
- Have any allergies to latex, local anesthetics or X-ray dye.

Please plan to have someone drive you home after your procedure. If you do not, your procedure may need to be rescheduled.

Does the procedure hurt?

Your doctor will inject a medicine to numb the skin over the facet joints. You may feel some stinging from this medicine. You may also feel some pressure when your doctor injects the local anesthetic and steroid into the area in and around your facet joints.

What to expect

The intra-articular facet block generally involves the steps below:

1. You will be taken to a patient waiting area. There we will check your ID band, measure your vital signs (such as your blood pressure and pulse) and ask you some basic questions about your health.
2. You will be taken into the procedure room where your doctor will ask for your consent to do the procedure.
3. You will lie on a table. Then the area to be injected will be cleaned and covered with a special sheet. This will help keep the area free of germs.
4. Your doctor will use a special X-ray to help view the area. He or she will then numb the area with a local anesthetic.
5. Your doctor will inject contrast (a substance that will help highlight the area on X-rays). If you are allergic to contrast, your doctor will discuss your options with you before the procedure.
6. Then your doctor will inject the combined numbing and steroid medication into your joint(s).

The procedure takes about 15–20 minutes. You will be awake during the procedure and may ask questions at any time. Before you leave, we will give you instructions on how to care for yourself at home.

Possible side effects

Side effects from an intra-articular facet block are rare. The most common side effect is pain where you were injected.

After the procedure

- Be as active as possible. Do the activities that usually cause pain in your neck or back. This will help your doctor know if your pain is caused by irritated facet joints.
- Keep track of your pain for 4 hours after your procedure. Your doctor will give you a diary to write down your pain levels.
- The local anesthetic will wear off in 4 hours. At that time, your usual level of pain may return until the steroid starts working. This can take up to 2 weeks.
- The pain relief from a facet block usually will last for several months, but this may vary from patient to patient. You may have 3–4 facet blocks a year.
- If you have no pain relief from the facet block, your doctor will work with you to find the source of your pain and explore your treatment options.

If you have any questions, please call the Spine Center at 617-754-5246 and select option 2.